

THE CLUE—WEEK 2

PLAYING AROUND



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Clue, Week 2 — Playing Around

This week we dive into the concept that we get to be the creator of a universe when we write a novel or a play. Using *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, along with some other analogies, we make some logical deductions about a creator's purposes.

While our purposes are tiny compared to God's purposes, the analogies give us a hint a grander things.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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1 Job 42:5–6 (NKJV)

*“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.
Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes.”*

In the end, after experiencing an ocean of pain and grief, Job sees his sinfulness in a new way. His kids are dead, his life trashed, but he has learned a profound lesson. Could that justify all those things? Could one man’s character development outweigh the importance of everything and everyone else?

It does in *A Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge’s character development is a higher purpose than everything else in that world. Thus, by analogy, it might make sense for God to prioritize Job’s character development over everything and everyone else.

This isn’t easy to get comfortable with. Our universe isn’t a novel or a play, and it’s almost insulting to compare God’s purposes to Charles Dickens’s, even if he is created in God’s image. Novels and plays are created for an audience; our universe has a much grander purpose. Still, the dramas we create illustrate how a creator’s purposes can be different from those of the created beings.

So, let’s dig a little deeper into the higher purposes in created universes. What are the higher purposes in *A Christmas Carol*? For example, what is the purpose of Jacob Marley’s suffering?

The first purpose of Marley’s suffering is to get Ebenezer Scrooge’s attention and to prepare him for the visits of the three ghosts.

But there are other higher purposes—mostly connected to the higher purposes of the story as a whole. Marley’s suffering—and Tiny Tim’s too—form the basis of the moral of the story. They are part of the higher purpose of teaching charity to the audience. This in turn fits into the even higher purpose of Dickens’s lifelong crusade to improve the lives of the poor in London.

Charles was offended by the deprivations they suffered, and many of his works were written to shine a light on their condition.

So, there are two takeaways from studying the higher purposes in *A Christmas Carol*. First, we see a clear case where the character development of a single character is more important than the lives of all the other characters.

The second takeaway from *A Christmas Carol* is that higher purposes can be part of even higher purposes. Jacob Marley’s suffering was part of the theme of the book, which was in turn part of Dickens’s larger goal of fighting poverty.

This fits quite well with the Bible. Character development is a relentless theme in scripture. From Abraham, to Jacob, to David, and even to Christ Himself, we see character development emphasized.

2 Hebrews 5:7–10 (NKJV)

who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,”

Almost every person in the Bible, including Christ, was subjected to trials that led to character development. Scripture records that character development, not just the events that spawned it. If that wasn't important, the accounts wouldn't have emphasized it so.

In the previous lesson, we used God's image in Charles Dickens to illustrate the general concept of a creator's higher purposes. Now let's directly consider God's higher purposes. So, “What are His higher purposes?” Specifically, “What's the purpose of everything? Why did God create the universe?”

The standard answer is, “For His glory.” That's undeniable; the references for this are too numerous to even list. Here are a few of my favorites.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. — Psalm 19:1 (NIV)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. — John 1:14 (NIV)

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” — John 17:1 (NIV)

And notice how the plan of salvation emphasizes God's glory, even while shepherding our character development.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. — Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)

The clause “so that no one can boast” is a purpose construction in the Greek. Precluding boasting is why we are saved by grace.

We cannot take credit; it all belongs to Him.

With boasting about our salvation off the table, we are humbled. This sets us up for the process of sanctification.

Growth in Christ is the primary goal of every Christian, and that's character development.

It's impossible to overstate how important this is in practice.

3 Romans 9:13-21 (NKJV)

As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

We know that God has the power and the authority to do anything He wants; it’s His universe.

But that doesn’t mean it’s right. How can these things be reconciled with what the Bible teaches about God’s goodness?

*Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.
The humble He guides in justice,
And the humble He teaches His way. — Psalm 25:8-9 (NKJV)*

We all have an innate sense of justice; it’s part of the image of God in us. If you’re troubled by the fact that God *has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills*, you should seek an answer.

This not one of those topics where the answer is something like, “Well, it’s just a mystery.” These questions have real, specific answers. They’re just not simple.

First off, let’s be honest about what this says. It begins with, *“Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”* Paul then builds on this, noting God’s authority to favor whoever He wants, climaxing with, *“I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”*

But, if everything *depends not on human will or exertion, but on God*, we’re left to wonder, *“Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?”* The answer is blunt. *Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?*

But we are more than lumps of clay. Justice for a lump of clay isn’t justice for a person. This is hard for people to get their minds around. Yes, we’re much more than clay, but God is much more than a potter.

Once again, God’s image in us provides a clue. The next two lessons will look at responsibility and justice in different realms.

4 Romans 9:22-24 (NKJV)

What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

But what about justice? Sure, God’s priorities are such that He has the power and the right to do anything He wants, just or unjust.

But that’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says God is just.

This is where things get complicated. The answer derives from the fact that that God isn’t merely more important than a potter. This gets back to the issue of God’s I AM being a higher level of existence.

If God foreordains “whatsoever comes to pass” how can he condemn people for actions that He foreordained? Isn’t God ultimately responsible?

Yes, but that little word “ultimately” is the key. There are often multiple levels of responsibility. We get a partial analogy from business, where multiple levels of responsibility are common.

Suppose something goes wrong with my new car. I expect to have it fixed, for free, by the dealer.

But what about the employee at the factory who made the mistake that caused the problem? Isn’t he or she ultimately responsible?

Well, yes and no. The employee is responsible, but not to me. The manufacturer may track defects and how they occur. If they do this, employees can be held responsible—but to the company, not to me.

I don’t care about that; I just want my car fixed. What matters to me is the warranty and the reputation of the company behind it. It’s the company that’s responsible to me.

So, we see that multiple people or organizations can be responsible for the same thing.

The question of responsibility isn’t a simple either-or question.

This analogy, like all analogies in theology, isn’t perfect. It only teaches a portion of the lesson—that responsibility can exist at multiple levels. An employee’s relationship with his or her employer is very different from our relationship with our creator.

Frankly, we aren’t capable of fully comprehending the God-man relationship; we can only bite off chunks of understanding.

The next lesson will take this a bit further.

5 Romans 9:19 (NKJV)

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?”

We can get one more clue about this from the way we’re created in the image of God. By thinking about our relationship with a play we wrote, we can learn something of God’s relationship with us. So, let’s write a play.

We need a bad guy, a hero, and a victim. Let’s use Snidely Whiplash, Dudley Do Right, and Nell respectively. Our play follows the standard plot line from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. Snidely ties Nell to the railroad tracks and says, “Marry me or you die.” Nell, as usual, says, “Never!”

But this time Dudley doesn’t arrive in time to save Nell. So, Snidely goes on trial for murder. He seems obviously guilty, but he makes a curious defense. “My actions were foreordained by the author of this play. How can you *find fault? For who has resisted His will?*” Is he right? What should the jury do?

There’s also the opposite question. What if the audience complains to me about the goriness of Nell getting run over by a train? And what if I reply, “Don’t blame me, it was Snidely who tied her to the tracks.”? Does that make sense?

Of course not. Both my defense and Snidely’s are silly because they speak to the wrong level of reality. The jurors will convict Snidely because they’re inside the play. He’s guilty **in that universe**. Conversely, I’m responsible **in this universe** for everything in the play.

Yes, God is ultimately responsible for everything, but outside of our created universe. Inside our universe, we’re responsible. Reconsider Exodus 3:14:

And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” — Exodus 3:14 (NKJV)

If God IS, in a way that we’re not, then His responsibility and our responsibility are in different universes. Remember, this is only an analogy designed for human comprehension. God’s existence is different from ours. That difference isn’t the same as the difference between our existence and that of a fictional character.

Even the idea that God exists “in a universe” is simplistic.

So, don’t latch on too tightly to these analogies. Just use them to get comfortable with Roman’s 9 and to build a sense of awe at the incomprehensible nature of God.

No one likes to think of themselves as analogous to a clay pot or a fictional character.

Good, this is supposed to be humbling.

6 Genesis 1:1–5 (NKJV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.

There are many creation theories. Like everything else grand, when we learn the full truth, we may laugh at the simple-minded views we held in this life. However, there is one creation theory that gains something from thinking about our creativity as being in the image of God. It’s no less simple-minded than the other creation theories, but here’s an argument for why it shouldn’t be rejected outright.

The theory in question is the one where the universe was created already “old.” One of the common objections to young Earth creationism is that the light we see from stars many light years away must have been emitted that many years ago.

One logical response is that the universe was created “in progress.” Thus, the light from distant stars was created in motion, on the way to Earth. This also means that everything else that appears to be very old was created already old.

That explanation does answer any objection about things appearing old but strikes some people as “too clever by half” specious reasoning.

Maybe so, but we do the same thing all the time with our created universes. For example, consider *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. It starts, “Marley was dead, to begin with.” That’s the beginning of the tale, but it’s not the beginning in every sense. It goes on to describe many things that happened earlier.

Dickens created a fictional universe that was already old, and Dickens was created in image of God. Does that prove that God created a universe that was already old?

Of course not. It just shows that such a theory of creation is plausible.

Disrespect for people we disagree with has become all too common in our society. This is most surprising with topics that no human can understand completely.

Such is the case with anything we cannot observe directly—things like creation theories and eschatology.

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity! — Psalm 133:1*

*Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as
brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; — 1 Peter 3:8*

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever had a moment of great growth?
2. Do you have a plan/strategy for your growth?
3. Do questions like this trouble you? (This is more a survey question than a discussion question. If most folks don't care about this, that affects which questions would be best for discussion.)
4. Have you ever been surprised by a responsibility?
5. What humbles you the most?
6. What issue causes the most division in the church?

Items for prayer: